A Visit to the Arnot Art Museum

Exploring Art that Expresses What It Means to Be Human

FAR 3950 To Be Human

Term III 2025

ARNOT ART MUSEUM

Programs Manager Summer Small greets the students, introducing them to the museum.

ELMIRA COLLEGE

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THE ARNOT ART MUSEUM IS LOCATED
235 Lake Street in Elmira, New York USA.

Housed in the 1833 Greek Revival former home of the Arnot family, with a grand late twentieth century gallery addition, the Museum displays its permanent collection of seventeenth to nineteenth century European paintings and nineteenth and twentieth century American art. Temporary exhibitions highlight various aspects of the collections and include works from around the world.

Elmira College students enrolled in the Term III "To Be Human" class at Elmira College chose to photograph and respond to artwork in the following galleries:

Reflections on Ancient Cultures
artifacts from Middle Kingdom Egypt & the Far East
CULTURES GALLERY

A Collector's Vision
The Matthias H. Arnot Collection
PICTURE GALLERY

MARY DONOVAN: industrial manipulation
sculptures in metal, wood, acrylic and stone
WEST WING FIRST LEVEL GALLERIES

RONALD GONZALEZ: inanimate presence
sculptural heads, figures, & assemblages from scavenged objects
WEST WING SECOND LEVEL GALLERIES

ARMAND CARMEN WARGNY, the extraordinary in the everday
from the collection of Jan K. Liberatore
READING ROOM

PASSAGES: selections from the collections
a rotating contemporary show
CENTER GALLERY

THE ASSIGNMENT:

At the museum, we will look for art work that reminds us of some of our readings, discussions and films. I will talk about a few pieces that we can discuss as a class. This should jumpstart your own ideas about how artwork can connect with what it means *to be human*.

1. After taking in the general view of the museum, find a piece of art that is somehow connected to anything we've discussed in class. There may be paintings or sculptures that suggest death, memory, family, or act as symbols for human emotions, such as happiness, anguish, or sadness. More generally, both abstract and realistic imagery may suggest aspects of what it means to be human.

Assignment should include:

-A photo of the artwork you are responding to

-An essay that ties the artwork to something we have discussed in class.

2. An alternative is to respond to a piece of art creatively: write a poem based on what you see, or are inspired by when looking at the artwork. You can also choose a poem that you think of, that was written by someone else.

RONALD GONZALEZ: inanimate presence
sculptural heads, figures, & assemblages from scavenged objects
WEST WING SECOND LEVEL GALLERIES

At the Arnot Art Museum, this piece of art really caught my eye. It appears to be a soldier who has a shoe in his mouth. It doesn't directly tell you what this sculpture is portraying, but I view it as a soldier that fought in World War II while the Holocaust was going on. Just by looking at the sculpture it kind of radiates a creepy and heavy feeling which I feel is very moving for such a small sculpture. This piece connects to the Slabtown field trip visual diary of traces of humanity. This soldier gives a visual representation of something that occurred in human history. It is something that wouldn't exist if humans never went to war with each other, or if the Holocaust never occurred. The sculpture is a direct reflection of traces that were left by humankind.

-Hannah

The Rocky Mountain Sheep (excerpt)

But the wild sheep from the battered rocks,
Sure foot and fleet of limb,
Gets up to see the stars go by
Along the mountain-rim.

Mary Austin

A Collector's Vision
The Matthias H. Arnot Collection
PICTURE GALLERY

Mountain Pastures

There's something in the mountain air
That helps a man to find his soul
Among the sheep that pasture there
Beneath the sky's eternal scroll.

Robert Frost

For me this artwork captures a moment of deep emotional expression and longing, offering a reflection on what it means to be human. To be human is to seek connection—to love, to hope, and to communicate across boundaries of space and silence. The painting shows a man on horseback reaching upward, possibly offering or receiving a token from a woman above, hidden behind a balcony. This gesture symbolizes the timeless human desire to be seen, remembered, and loved. The animals at his side contrast with the vulnerability of his outstretched arm, reminding me that all living things, human or not, crave intimacy and affirmation. In this single moment, the painting conveys that love, in its quiet, earnest form, is one of the most universal and defining aspects of the human experience.

-Alyssa

JEAN-LÉON GÉRÔME The Rose (The Love Token)
A Collector's Vision
The Matthias H. Arnot Collection
PICTURE GALLERY

RONALD GONZALEZ: inanimate presence
sculptural heads, figures, & assemblages from scavenged objects
WEST WING SECOND LEVEL GALLERIES

This creepy sculpture, with its haunting eyes and distorted facial features taps into a deep, primal part of what it means to be human: the ability to feel fear, discomfort, and unease. There's something profoundly creepy about its presence—like a memory of war, loss, or survival frozen in time. But to be human is not only to feel joy and connection, but also to confront what disturbs us. The piece forces us to acknowledge the things we often try to ignore—pain, trauma, and the remnants of violence—and in doing so, it speaks to the complexity of what it means to be human: we are shaped not just by love and beauty, but by fear as well.

-Alyssa

ARMAND CARMEN WARGNY
the extraordinary in the everday
from the collection of Jan K. Liberatore
READING ROOM

Up close, you can see kittens, but if you are from a distance you might see the face of a bull/cow.

These works of art caught my eye because, in a unique way, they reminded me of a central idea that we have been talking about in class. The concept I am referring to is that an aspect of being human is to have empathy- and to be able to see multiple perspectives. In both paintings, looking at them from different distances (or perspectives) allows you to see things that you might not have seen if you only look at the image from one view. Humans have the unique capacity to see the world in many different ways, so what I see in these pieces might not be seen through the eyes of another person. In my eyes, art fosters empathy. When you create art, you are creating it to express your own thoughts and ideas, but at the same time you allow others to understand your ideas, but also form their own ideas about your work.

-Gavin

Reflections on Ancient Cultures
artifacts from Middle Kingdom Egypt & the Far East
CULTURES GALLERY

I think this piece reflects a lot of what we talked about in class. The work of art wrestles with difficult topics that define us as humans, such as contemplating death, dying, dementia, and right to life issues. To me it showed that we are all the same underneath the skin and that things like race, gender, sexuality, or disabilities don't matter in the bigger picture because ultimately the core of us under the skin all looks the same.

-Piper

HUGUES MERLE The Lunatic
A Collector's Vision
The Matthias H. Arnot Collection
PICTURE GALLERY

She sits alone beside the well,
Her clothes are torn, her face looks tired.
She holds her baby, fast asleep,
Like all her strength has just expired.
The woods are quiet, no one near,
The rope just swings, the water's gone.
But still she stays—she doesn't cry—
Just holds her kid and carries on.

-Daniel

ANTHONIE DE LORME Interior of a Church
A Collector's Vision
The Matthias H. Arnot Collection
PICTURE GALLERY

This is a painting of the inside of the Church of St. Nicholas. This painting dates back to 1657 and it is oil paint. To me this painting represents the strength of mankind. Almost everything in this painting was created by humans, from the people in the backdrop to the building itself. It shows me that humans are truly amazing and can do almost anything even with the little technology we had in 1657. This painting is a symbol of memory and legacy, it's a structure that is meant to last and be able to serve a purpose to many generations.

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,* memories were erased and there were only traces of emotions and connections; the painting demonstrates the same thing. As everyone who helped build this beautiful church has passed, all that remains are stories and some connections to the original builders.

-Cam

RONALD GONZALEZ: inanimate presence
sculptural heads, figures, & assemblages from scavenged objects
WEST WING SECOND LEVEL GALLERIES

The art piece called "One Hundred Fourteen Small Figures" by Ronald Gonzalez includes 114 small, individual figures that are made of different colors and materials, such as wire, steel, detritus, and found objects. When I saw these figures, it reminded me of people and how everyone is so different from one another, whether that be externally with physical appearance or internally with personality or beliefs, underscoring diversity. However, they are all similar in that they are made of the same materials, just like we are all human, made of the same organs and body systems. I feel that the size of the figures being so tiny serves to emphasize that there are so many people in this world. However, I do wonder if there is a meaning behind the artist choosing the number 114. When I looked at these figures, there was not a particular one that stood out to me, as they all looked somewhat similar. This reinforces the idea that people should feel free to pursue their passions and what they desire without the fear of judgement because we are all human. In the end people are not paying much attention to you, so it is better to live the life you want and not the life someone else wants you to live. These figures look similar to the potato-shaped dolls that Clementine had in her apartment in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. These potato people that she created represent actual people, such as herself and Joel, which is similar to the way I perceived the 114 figures to be actual people. In both cases, this form of art might look weird to viewers on the surface, but if time is taken to try and understand it, then it becomes more meaningful.

-Mahima

The art piece called “Circle Broken” by Mary Louise Donovan is an interesting piece that shows three separate sections with chains that have a glowing light. This is inside a circle that seems to be chipped on the bottom. Circles can symbolize many things, such as unity or a cyclical process, such as life from birth to death. The fact that the circle is broken on the bottom can represent death, as this is the last stage of life. The first two chains are intact with complete loops, while the last chain is broken as only half of a loop is seen. Chains are often used for confinement and to restrain individuals. The chains being of different lengths can show varying connections, as a longer chain would be stronger than a shorter chain. While the first two chains are of metal color, the third broken one is the only one that has glowing loops. Light is a positive thing that can represent hope, and combined with the fact that it is broken, can represent freedom and the ability to escape. The artist may be trying to convey the message that some people are able to escape being subject to someone else’s rule, while many are not able to. This relates to the documentary we watched about Art Spiegelman, where we learn about his parents’ experiences with the Holocaust. The broken lit-up chain can represent his parents, who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp. However, the intact chain can represent Art Spiegelman’s brother, Richieu, who was poisoned during the war and died. The fact that these chains are in a box that is lit up can show that, despite people not surviving or being able to escape, others share stories to keep their memory alive. For instance, Art Spiegelman wrote *Maus*, which tells the story of his father’s experience during World War II, and this graphic novel informs people about the suffering people had to endure during this time.

-Mahima

MARY DONOVAN: industrial manipulation
sculptures in metal, wood, acrylic and stone
WEST WING FIRST LEVEL GALLERIES

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This is one of the sculptures I took a picture of. I believe that this represents how pollution kills. The living aspect of the piece are the two fish that have been impaled. To be human is to preserve, and this shows how our world is hurting. The killing of the fish was done by what looks to be twigs or branches. These are a part of nature so it should seem natural but there is so much debris and litter surrounding the entire piece. On Monday we walked around and took pictures of signs of human life throughout Slabtown. On that field trip there was trash almost everywhere you looked. We saw historic monuments that were respected and preserved but yet it seems that we, as a society, cannot do our part to keep the place we get to call home clean.

-Aiden

BRETT BIGBEE Foreside
PASSAGES: selections from the collections
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CENTER GALLERY

I chose this picture because I think it does a beautiful job depicting the idea of life and death. In his hand, is a dead flower. Yet this man is young and appearing to be full of life. This idea relates to the course because we have talked a lot about death and the fragility of life. We truly don't know when death will reach us, and it may be in the palm of our hand quite literally like this image.

-Sophie

ARTURO RICCI Golden Wedding
A Collector's Vision
The Matthias H. Arnot Collection
PICTURE GALLERY

This painting relates to what we have discussed in many ways. First I can see the center of the painting and a big group gathering around what looks to be the grandmother of this potential family, with people of all ages looking at her almost as if they are celebrating her. I think this aspect relates to the class because isn't this really what it is to be human? Spending time with loved ones and celebrating life? From young to old they all are smiling with many flowers as well.

Looking around at other aspects I can see a group sitting at a table enjoying each others' company. I can also see on the other side a group playing music. Another woman is cleaning the dishes. I think every aspect of this painting speaks volumes of what it is to be human because there are so many separate groups that seem to come together and tell a story in this one image.

-Katie

Reflections on Ancient Cultures
artifacts from Middle Kingdom Egypt & the Far East
CULTURES GALLERY

This is the X-ray of an Egyptian mummified body. This reminds me of the movie *Departures*. For ancient Egytptians, mummifying people was a practice that they did for the deceased as a way to preserve them for the afterlife. They did this with tons of care and respect. This is very similar to Daigo in *Departures* who also prepares the dead with great care and respect before they are buried or cremated.

-Kobe

WILLIAM VAN DE VELDE THE YOUNGER Man of War in a Storm
A Collector's Vision
The Matthias H. Arnot Collection
PICTURE GALLERY

I chose this image because this boat is braving a scary and wavy ocean. To be human: it is inevitable that challenges and obstacles will come in our way. The boat will sometimes get rocky, but it is important to stay strong and not tip. What doesn't kill us only makes us stronger; it's about maintaining resilience and not letting outside problems or negativity become overwhelming or "sink the ship."

-Alayna